

OP-ED: MEMPHIANS DESERVE TO LIVE IN SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS, AND WE HAVE THE PLAN AND LEADERSHIP TO REVERSE CRIME TRENDS

BY BILL GIBBONS



Every citizen deserves to live in a safe neighborhood. We must not surrender any part of our city to a high crime rate. In addition to the obligation we have to all of our citizens, making our city safer is the key to more and better jobs, increasing our tax base, and growing our population.

Since 2012, the major violent crime rate (made up of murders, rapes, robberies, and aggravated assaults) has been inching up. Mayor Jim Strickland is correct that the level of violent crime is unacceptable and our biggest challenge.

Law enforcement leaders and prosecutors agree that our violent crime rate is driven by:

- Gang violence that is now more difficult to control due to the growth of splinter groups, as well as the effect of social media in escalating gang disputes;
- Guns in the wrong hands, in particular, juveniles and convicted felons;
- Drug trafficking that predictably turns violent; and
- Domestic violence, which accounts for about half of all reported crimes against persons.

The good news is that, over the past 10 years, we've seen a significant downward trend in our overall crime rate (54 different categories) and major property crimes (burglaries, motor vehicle thefts, and other felony thefts), although there has been a recent surge in motor vehicle thefts.

Fortunately, we have strong leadership committed to meeting the crime challenge, a new five-year Operation: Safe Community crime plan, and a means of evaluating whether we are making progress under that plan through the University of Memphis' Public Safety Institute.

Less than six months into the new plan, we are making progress.

The district attorney's community prosecution effort in specific geographic areas is increasing the level of cooperation among law enforcement, prosecutors, and concerned citizens to tackle problem people and blighted, crime ridden problem properties.

In 2011, we had our lowest violent crime rate in recent years. Since then, we've had a net loss of about 20 percent of our city police force. While it will take years to make up this loss, we are now on the verge of finally seeing a net increase. But it's not just a matter of increasing the number of police officers. We must make sure they are deployed in a smart, data-driven manner.

We've enacted tougher state sentences for convicted felons toting guns if their prior convictions involve violence or drug trafficking. A tougher state law coupled with effective federal law will help hold those convicted felons who carry guns accountable. More importantly, by conveying the consequences, we will hopefully get many of them to change their behavior.

Through the county-led Office of Re-Entry, significant progress is being made to reduce the number of repeat offenders by developing a transitional work program for ex-offenders coupled with other important services.

Under the county's leadership, we are moving toward an effective assessment system to break the cycle of juvenile delinquency by addressing issues more comprehensively upon a juvenile's first encounter with law enforcement.

Intentionally, the new plan focuses on actions that can have a near-term impact. At the same time, we can help reduce crime longer term through such efforts as addressing the drug addiction epidemic, increasing mentors for at risk youth, expanding enrollment in pre-K education, and continuing to reduce the rate of teen pregnancies.

Thirty years ago, New York City was ranked among America's most dangerous cities. In 1990, Time magazine ran a cover story titled "The Rotting of the Big Apple." But with strong leadership, a solid plan, and a sense of urgency, a turnaround occurred in New York City, with dramatic crime reductions. Since the turnaround, along with job growth and a growing tax base, New York City's population has increased by over one million people.

Memphis, we have the leadership and the plan. What we need is a healthy sense of urgency by the community at large. The mayors, law enforcement, and prosecutors can't do it alone. They need all of us to show some Memphis grit to get the job done!

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